FERGUS J. KING

Epicureanism and the Gospel of John

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe

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A Study of their Compatibility

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

This book has its origins in undergraduate studies at the University of St Andrews when Peter Woodward and the late Prof. Ian Kidd respectively introduced me to Epicureanism and Stoicism. They sowed the seed which has eventually germinated. It was watered by the late Prof. John C. O'Neill and Dr Douglas Templeton at Edinburgh. My *doktorvater* at the University of South Africa, Prof. J. Eugene Botha encouraged me to develop a theological method which embraced comparison without genealogy. Further cultivation came from two fine systematicians, Prof. John C. McDowell and Dr. Scott Kirkland, who, in a short-lived experiment to develop a full-blown theological presence at the University of Newcastle, NSW, tolerated my enthusiasm for dead Greek thinkers: they remain good colleagues, though we are now all transplanted to Melbourne. The faculty at Trinity College, Melbourne have all been most supportive of these same foibles, especially Dean Robert Derrenbacker and Prof. Dorothy A. Lee. Prof. Lee, emeritus Prof. William Loader (Murdoch University), Prof. Jason König (University of St Andrews) and Prof. John T. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame) were all most encouraging and helpful in the quest to find a publisher. I must record my deep thanks to Prof. Jörg Frey and the editors of WUNT II for accepting my manuscript for publication, and to Elena Müller, Tobias Stäbler and Tobias Weiß at Mohr Siebeck for their patience and courtesy through the editing process. Material which had previously been published in my "Pleasant Places in the Gospel according to John: A Classical Motif as an Introit to Theological Awareness", *Pacifica* 30/1 (2017), 3–19 is reproduced here by permission of SAGE Publications, Inc. Any mistakes, substantive or typological, which persist are entirely my own work.

Lastly, I must record my thanks to Irene and the boys for their love and patience, when scholarship was a distraction from family.

Fergus J. King,
Melbourne, June 2020.

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviations used follow the conventions set out in Billie Jean Collins, Bob Buller, John F. Kutsko and the Society of Biblical Literature. *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines* (2nd ed. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), except for the following:

DL – Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers.*

DRN – Titus Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura.*

FG – the Fourth Gospel (the Gospel according to John).

KD – the Κυρίαι Δόξαι (the Principle Doctrines of Epicureanism).

PHerc – Herculaneum Papyrus.

VS – the Vatican Sentences (a collection of Epicurean teachings).

Chapter 1

Introduction

A. Whence "Compatibility"?

If Tertullian was able to ask the question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?", it seems likely that modern commentators might equally feel impelled to comment: "What might Epicureanism have to do with the Fourth Gospel?" It is a question which is immediately raised by the impression that Epicureanism is an atheistic, hedonist, and materialist school of thought, which surely can have little in common with a worldview like that of the Fourth Gospel (FG). However, to leave the question there would be simply to abide with a bifurcation both ancient and modern.

Norman DeWitt, one of the earliest and, perhaps, most enthusiastic proponents of Epicureanism in the twentieth century, noted that significant work was needed:

> If the history of Epicureanism were as well understood as the history of Stoicism, we might discover that there is more of Epicureanism than of Stoicism in the New Testament.[1]

A *caveat* follows: his enthusiasm may have veered, on occasion, to the excessive.[2] DeWitt's summation that "it would have been singularly easy for an Epicurean to become a Christian",[3] even if it may be tempered by James Campbell's wry addition: "– and, one might suppose, a Christian to become an Epicurean", is worthy of further exploration.[4] His claim should neither be taken for granted, nor summarily dismissed, given his continued stature as an Epicurean scholar. Where Epicureanism has come into the picture it is usually in

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[1] Norman DeWitt, "Vergil and Epicureanism", *The Classical Weekly* XXV/12 (1932), 89–96 at 96.

[2] R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools* (SBL Dissertation Series 26. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 101; Clarence E. Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) 8, fn. 14.

[3] Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and his Philosophy* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1967), 31–32.

[4] James I. Campbell, "The Angry God: Epicureans, Lactantius, and Warfare" in *Epicurus: His Continuing Influence and Contemporary Relevance*, ed. Dane R. Gordon and David B. Suits (Rochester, NY: RIT Graphic Arts Press, 2003), 45–68 at 47.

relation to Acts 17 and the Pauline literature where Greek settings appear to make such echoes more likely.[5]

A key term within Epicureanism was ἀταραξία, and it provides the launching point for the explorations which follow. The words of Jesus in John 14:1 and 27, with their exhortation that the disciples, "let not their hearts be troubled" appears close to Epicureanism, prompted by the use of the cognate verb, ταράσσειν. Despite such shared vocabulary, little interest has been shown in exploring whether such a phrasing might resonate with Epicurean thinking.

None of the classic commentaries such as Barrett, Brown, Brodie, Bultmann, Lindars, or the literary indices in Schnackenburg record any reference to Epicurus.[6] Specialised studies of the philosophical background tended to look elsewhere. Thus, C.H. Dodd's *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* developed interest in the potential overlap of the FG with Platonism, but contained no mention of Epicureanism.[7] Questions have been raised about Dodd's focus on Platonism by older and more recent commentators.[8]

The absence of Epicureanism from studies of the FG extends into more recent work: none of the indices in Bruner, Malina and Rohrbaugh, Moloney,

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[5] Thus, *inter alios*, Norman DeWitt, *St Paul and Epicurus* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1954); Glad, *Paul and Philodemus*; Graham Tomlin, "Christians and Epicureans", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 68 (1997), 51–72.

[6] Charles K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John*. 2nd ed. (Philadelphia PA: Westminster, 1978); Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB 29; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988); Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray et al. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971); Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (New Century Bible; London: Oliphants, 1972); Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John, Vols. 1–3* (ET. London: Burns & Oates, 1980–82).

[7] Charles H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

[8] Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "Setting the Scene; Stoicism and Platonism in the transitional period in Ancient Philosophy" in *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, ed. Tuomas Rasimus et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010) 1–14 argues that Stoicism rather than Platonism was the dominant philosophical school of the early Imperial period. For criticism of Dodd's emphasis on Platonism in relation to the FG, see Rudolf Bultmann, "Review of Dodd, C. H.: The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel", *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954), 77–91; F.N. Davey, "The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel by C.H. Dodd", *Journal of Theological Studies* 4 (1953), 234–246, but the discussion focusses rather on the level of knowledge of Platonism rather than its popularity in relation to Stoicism, see John Painter, "The Prologue as a Hermeneutical Key to Reading the Fourth Gospel" in *Studies in the Gospel of John and its Christology*, ed. Joseph Verdeyhen et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 37–60 at 45. Millar Burrows, "Thy Kingdom Come", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955), 1–8 deplores the tendency of British scholarship of the period to assume that a Platonic worldview shaped eschatological speculation.

Morris, Neyrey, Ridderbos, von Wahlde or Witherington make reference to Epicurus or Epicureanism.[9] Modern scholars, dissatisfied with the prominence given by previous generations to Platonism, have increasingly focused on the possible interplay between the Johannine material and Stoicism.[10] So, Troels Engberg-Pedersen's *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* does not include discussion of Epicureanism, but focusses on Stoicism.[11] This would appear a road more travelled.

However, there are exceptions. R. Alan Culpepper's comparison of the Johannine community to Greek philosophical schools includes significant references to Epicureanism. He suggests rather that Epicureanism, especially in the great cities, had influenced Jewish schools, and that these, in turn, may have helped shaped emerging Christianity, even, perhaps Johannine Christianity:

> This indirect influence may account for the similarity between the use of φίλος in the Epicurean and Johannine literature.[12]

In a more recent piece, he briefly mentions that the FG and Epicurus share an interest in thanatology, but diverge significantly.[13] His work refers to that of Jaime Clark-Soles which includes a longer study of the potential convergence between Epicureanism and the FG as part of her research on death and the afterlife in the New Testament.[14] Jo-Ann Brant notes three references to the *Vatican Sentences (VS* – i.e., a collection of Epicurean aphorisms), illustrating

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[9] Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998); Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998); Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, (Rev'd. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); Hermann Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

[10] Work on Stoicism in John is already at a more advanced stage, for example, Tuomas Rasimus et al. (eds.), *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010).

[11] Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[12] Culpepper, *The Johannine School*, 121. See further in Chapter 7.

[13] R. Alan Culpepper, "The Creation Ethics of the Gospel of John" in *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner and Sherri Brown (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), 67–90 at 86, fn. 57.

[14] Jaime Clark-Soles, *Death and the Afterlife in the New Testament* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2006), 110–149, especially 135–149. Part of this material also appears in Jaime Clark-Soles, "'I Will Raise [Whom?] Up on the Last Day': Anthropology as a Feature of Johannine Eschatology" in *New Currents in John: A Global Perspective*, ed. Francisco Lozada and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 29–53.

a point about φιλία (friendship) in Jesus's relationship with Martha and Mary, but drawing no Epicurean parallels with John 14.[15] Craig Keener cites cross-references to Diogenes Laertius, but sees the terms as idiomatic, and does not develop the Epicurean (or even broader philosophical) dimension beyond potentially indicating weakness.[16] He also notes death,[17] and human responsibility,[18] but all these are cursory and figure in general observations on Hellenistic philosophy. Others mention Epicurus and Epicureanism, only to summarily dismiss them from their subsequent investigations of the FG.[19] Yet, these all serve to indicate the presence and possibility of cross-references to Epicurean φιλία,[20] pedagogy,[21] creation, human nature, of Epicureanism as a dialogue partner in ancient environments. Even short notes suggest that there might still be mileage in a detailed exploration of Epicureanism in relation to the FG: arguments from, or embracing, silence do not mean that this area of study has been exhausted.

B. The Shape of this Study

The research that follows will explore the question raised by DeWitt with a tighter focus: how much of Epicureanism might there be in the FG? It will not attempt to argue that the FG is derived from Epicurean philosophy, or vice-versa. The present task is to explore how the two traditions might be compatible given their apparent kinship, which is based on rejection of dominant contemporary conventions. It might reveal that they share points in common, but equally it may well reveal that, for a variety of reasons, they are incompatible, even if they seem to share, in the broadest terms, some correspondence. Additionally, the possibility of "cultural incommensurability"

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[15] Jo-Ann A. Brant, *John* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 172, 213. Here English translations are not always helpful. The discussion in Chapter 7 will show that discussions of love and friendship overlap, not least because of the key Greek vocabulary: ἀγάπη, ἔρως and φιλία.

[16] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary, Vols. 1–2* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 845, 875, 915.

[17] Keener, *The Gospel*, 365, 376–377, 381, 405, 553, 652, 728, 766.

[18] Keener, *The Gospel*, 573.

[19] Douglas Estes, *The Temporal Mechanics of the Fourth Gospel: A Theory of Hermeneutical Relativity in the Gospel of John* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 53 (time); Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Born from Above: The Anthropology of the Gospel of John.* Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 29 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992), 36 ("fixedness" and metaphysics); Johns Varghese, *The Imagery of Love in the Gospel of John*. Analecta Biblica 177. (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2009), 214 (friendship).

[20] Keener, *The Gospel*, 1005, 1008.

[21] Keener, *The Gospel*, 57, 979.

cannot be completely ruled out,[22] although the phenomenon of incommensurability may likely be considered partial or, to use another image, porous, rather than total. [23] Nor is there any attempt to suggest that the Jesus of history was an Epicurean.[24] This work is concerned rather with the FG's portrayal of Jesus as being compatible with Epicurean traditions, and how it might have been read in light of them.[25] Such an approach is not unprecedented. It is worth noting Robert Royalty's remarks in relation to his exploration of wealth in Revelation which focusses on the identity of the audience or readers:

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[22] Kögler illustrates this with an example, following Alasdair MacIntyre, appropriate to the environments which are under investigation here: "how god concepts cannot be adequately translated from polytheistic contexts into monotheistic horizons" (Hans Herbert Kögler, *The Power of Dialogue: Critical Hermeneutics after Gadamer and Foucault*, trans. Paul Hendrickson [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999], 71).

[23] Derek L. Phillips, "Paradigms and Incommensurability", *Theory and Society* 2/1 (1975), 37–61.

[24] Any such endeavor would immediately be open to many of the same criticisms as those levelled at the portrayals of Jesus as a Cynic. For sample literature on this debate, see, *inter alios,* John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993); F. Gerald Downing, *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First Century Tradition* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1988), *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992); Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988); John Moles, "Cynic Influence Upon First-Century Judaism and Early Christianity" in *The Limits of Ancient Biography*, ed. B. McGing and J. Mossman (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2006), 89–116. Critical summaries of the Cynic claim in Gregory A. Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God: Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 9–166; Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 18–21; Michael McClymond, "Jesus" in *The Rivers of Paradise: Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad as Religious Founders*, ed. D. N. Freedman and M. McClymond (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 309–456 at 321–323; Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Quest for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd ed. (Downers' Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 58–92.

[25] African hermeneutics are helpful in considering its use of the term "resonance" to denote agreement or compatibility. The Pope-Levinsons, in exploring the relationship between the texts of Jewish Scripture and African Traditional Religion, identify "resonance" as means of describing a "kindred atmosphere": it includes elements like the "pervasiveness of religion", and "the centrality of solidarity and group loyalty" (Priscilla Pope-Levison and John Levison, *Jesus in Global Contexts* [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992], 95). Fidon Mwombeki, in a fuller discussion of the term, notes that resonance may include both internalised theological presuppositions and socio-cultural material (Fidon R. Mwombeki, "The Hermeneutic of Resonance: Making Biblical Theology Relevant Today" (Paper presented at TLC Augsburg Convention, 2009) 8–9. Accessed online 31 January 2010 from http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DTS/TLC_Augsburg/Papers/Mwombeki.pdf.

> Few of the Christians who heard the Apocalypse would have had the knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures that John had, whereas all would be conversant in the public aspects of Greco-Roman culture that organized social life in the cities of Asia Minor.[26]

While noting that Royalty's "John" need not be identified with the evangelist, these remarks remain apposite also for the study of the FG, or indeed any text which potentially engaged with a Graeco-Roman audience: people may hear what their previous cultural experience (or "anterior knowledge")[27] allows them to hear and so those "public aspects of Greco-Roman culture" frame the interpretive task. Thus, a Graeco-Roman audience with little or no exposure to the scriptural traditions may glean from their encounter, not an understanding based on such foundations, but one drawn from their own prior experience and exposure. That, the physical evidence suggests, might have included an Epicurean element. We might expect Epicureans to ask questions specific to their tradition from the text and can then explore how compatible the answers to such questions might be.

The need for broad environmental studies is also seen in the comments of Larry Paul Jones. In describing Johannine symbolism, he makes the valuable point that the contexts of both the implied author and reader make a difference to the process of interpretation:

> While it will certainly benefit readers to know as much as possible about the world in which the author lived, unless we limit ability to interpret the text to the few with that knowledge, we can also expect the ordinary and commonplace features of the symbolic vehicle, along with its narrative context, to provide insights into and parameters for interpretation and understanding. Thus, while we cannot possibly arrive at *the* reading of the text, it is possible to offer a reading.[28]

Craig Koester additionally reminds us that symbols may function at different levels: core symbols are shared across a variety of cultural expressions, even if they develop distinctive overtones through the use of metaphor and/or supporting symbols.[29] They might well include life, water, bread and light, and "stand on the boundary between various Jewish and Hellenistic modes of speech".[30]

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[26] Robert M. Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven: The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 81.

[27] James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 184, 187, 189, 196.

[28] Larry Paul Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 145. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 20–21.

[29] Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 5, 9.

[30] Koester, *Symbolism*, 234.

Nor need such studies demand complex, technical appropriations of the material. Pierre Hadot suggests that the possibility of the handling of Epicurean forms and concepts in a non-technical manner was real, given their form in the early imperial period:

> Whereas Platonism and Aristotelianism were reserved for an elite which had the "leisure" to study, carry out research and contemplate, Epicureanism and Stoicism were addressed to everyone: rich and poor, male and female, free citizens and slaves. Whoever adopted the Epicurean or Stoic way of life and put it into practice would be considered a philosopher even if he or she did not develop a philosophical discourse, either written or oral.[31]

Erlend MacGillvray provides a helpful summary which gives more detail about the broader reception of a number of writers and schools beyond technical or elite discussion: Dio Chrysostom, Maximus of Tyre, Themistius, Potamo of Alexandria, the Stoicism of first century CE Corinth, Euphrates, and Epictetus all exercised wide influence.[32] He further notes the use of the ἐπιτομή (shortened or condensed distillations of longer and more complex theories and arguments, rather than an abridgement) in spreading philosophical interest. However, these were viewed as a mixed blessing: there were concerns that they might not accurately reflect the more detailed expositions.[33] They were common within Epicureanism and may have helped its influence to spread beyond formal adherence to the school itself. Epicurus himself appears to have encouraged the memorization of such material:

> Τοῖς μὴ δυναμένοις, ὦ Ἡρόδοτε, ἕκαστα τῶν περὶ φύσεως ἀναγεγραμμένων ἡμῖν ἐξακριβοῦν μηδὲ τὰς μείζους τῶν συντεταγμένων βίβλους διαθρεῖν ἐπιτομὴν τῆς ὅλης πραγματείας εἰς τὸ κατασχεῖν τῶν ὁλοσχερωτάτων γε δοξῶν τὴν μνήμην ἱκανῶς αὐτὸς παρεσκεύασα, ἵνα παρ' ἑκάστους τῶν καιρῶν ἐν τοῖς κυριωτάτοις βοηθεῖν αὐτοῖς δύνωνται, καθ' ὅσον ἂν ἐφάπτωνται τῆς περὶ φύσεως θεωρίας.
>
> Herodotus, I myself have prepared a summary (epitome) of the whole system for those who are unable to study any of the writings about physics in detail or the longer treatments to

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[31] Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), 108.

[32] Erlend D. MacGillivray, "Epitomizing Philosophy and the Critique of Epicurean Popularizers", *Journal of Ancient History* 3/1 (2015), 1–33 at 20. The wider spread of philosophy is also recognised in Nathan J. Barnes' exploration of philosophically educated women in Corinth, which he terms a work of "historical imagination" (Nathan J. Barnes, *Reading 1 Corinthians with Philosophically Educated Women* [Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014], 201). He adds an important cautionary methodological note. Recognizing that an irrefutable historical reconstruction is impossible, and given the limitations faced by modern scholarship in exploring ancient contexts, he claims to offer an historically plausible account; one which recognises the limitations faced in reconstructing the implied reader (Barnes, *Reading 1 Corinthians*, 200).

[33] MacGillivray, "Epitomizing", 3; see also Peter A. Brunt, "On Historical Fragments and Epitomes", *Classical Quarterly* 30 (1980), 477–494 at 487 who notes this primarily in reference to historical works.

retain the key points in a fitting manner, so that they may assist themselves to grasp what is most important – to the extent that they might enter into the study of physics. [34]

This indicates an approval for condensed forms of material to facilitate the spread of the school's doctrine in the form of the ἐπιτομή. What emerges is significant: the writings focus on the teaching of Epicurus and the other significant thinkers of the school and provide records of their teaching. These are primarily records of what they taught with incidental biographical details.

Furthermore, Epicurean ideas might flourish outwith the formal boundaries of the school, even in other philosophical traditions: members of the Academy might well have cherry-picked for their own use elements of Epicureanism which they found helpful.[35]

In the face of scholarly silence, a proposal to investigate potential links between the FG and Epicurean philosophy must start with some basics. The claim for potential historicity demands an exploration of whether the two phenomena co-existed; one which is strengthened by paying close attention to geographical and temporal data (Chapter 2).

Given such a possibility, and no methodological reason to exclude Epicurean phenomena from any study, it becomes permissible to explore how an Epicurean reader might have engaged with the FG: what might have seemed compatible and what might not. If nothing else, an exploration of how the two traditions explore shared themes would allow us to reflect on DeWitt's remarks about the ease or likelihood of someone moving from one tradition to the other, and go some way to answering his question about how much of Epicureanism might be found, not just within this part of the NT, but within other writings within that canon. It must be stressed that any such engagement is presented as a possibility, not as a definitive cause for the composition of the FG. A claim that the FG was written intentionally as a counterblast to Epicureanism would meet with immediate skepticism, if not hostility. To make any such claim would be to overstep the conclusions which might be drawn from these environmental factors.

Such a study starts with an examination of the key term ἀταραξία (Chapter 3), which appears in both traditions, and might be addressed under a question

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[34] Diogenes Laertius 10.35. Text from *Diogenes Laertius: Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, ed. Tiziano Dorandi (Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 50. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2013), 755–756. Translation mine. See Abraham J. Malherbe, "Self-Definition among Epicureans and Cynics" in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition Vol. 3: Self-definition in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Ben F. Meyer and Ed P. Sanders (London: SCM Press, 1982), 46–59 at 48. The short section on Epicureanism is omitted from a later version of the article: "Self-Definition among the Cynics" in *Light from the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity. Collected Essays 1959–2012, by Abraham J. Malherbe*, ed. Carl. R. Holladay, John T. Fitzgerald, Gregory E. Sterling and James W. Thompson (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 635–650.

[35] Hadot, *What is Philosophy?*, 141.

of the aims and benefits of subscribing to the teaching and tenets of each. It then moves into reflections on death (Chapter 4), given that fear of death was a major consideration addressed by the Epicureans, and one pertinent to the substance of the FG. A third question concerns the nature of the gods (Chapter 5), and whether one needs to live in fear of them: here both traditions appear at odds with much popular Graeco-Roman religious thought and experience. Reflection on the identity of the key figures of both traditions also figure, not least because both claim some kind of divine status for their respective founders, and both exhibit evidence of cult, rituals and titles (Chapter 6). Lastly, both wrestle with the question of the relationship of the tradition, manifest in some kind of community organisation or sensibility, to wider society; a significant area of study which also embraces psychagogy, discipleship and παρρησία (Chapter 7). In each of these, the Epicurean position will first be described, and then read in relation to the FG to assess their compatibility. The reader who wishes to skim the arguments quickly will find short summaries of the salient points at the end of each chapter. These findings will then allow a final assessment of the compatibility of the two schools or traditions to be made (Chapter 8).

Chapter 2

A Time and a Place: The Fourth Gospel and Epicureanism

A. The Spread of Epicureanism

The School or Garden of Epicurus was located in Athens from 306 BCE, after unsuccessful attempts to establish centres in Mytilene and Lampsacus.[1] From there it spread through the Greek-speaking world.

Epicureanism is often presented as a dogmatic school with little variation from the teachings of its founders. Recent scholarship has, however, found that this is over-simplistic and there is a nuanced amount of development within the school. Thus, Robert Strozier notes Lucretius that holds a view of both the canonic and consciousness distinct from that of Epicurus, but that their variant methodologies do not ultimately signify major differences:

> The conclusion reached here about the difference between Epicurus and Lucretius does not directly affect most of the conclusions reached about Epicurus yet based on information from the *De rerum natura*, primarily because most such arguments are concerned with general philosophic method, with respect to which Lucretius and Epicurus are almost identical.[2]

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[1] Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1992), 62.

[2] Robert M. Strozier, *Epicurus and Hellenistic Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 151. This is not always the case. The Dionysiac tradition is a prime example of a tradition so fluid that its texts must be used carefully within their immediate contexts: Dionysiac thought and practice evolved so much that it is sometimes almost impossible to detect significant continuity between its different periods. For the fluidity of the Dionysiac tradition, see Fergus J. King, *More than a Passover: Inculturation in the Supper Narratives of the New Testament* (New Testament Studies in Contextual Exegesis 3; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007), 67–68. Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of the Indestructible Life* trans. Ralph Mannheim (Bollingen Series LXV.2; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) gives an exhaustive account of the different Dionysiac periods; pages 349–388 describe the expression of the myth and cult in late antiquity which differs significantly from earlier periods. Albert Henrichs, "Changing Dionysiac Identities" in *Jewish and Christion Self-Definition, Vol. 3: Self-Definition in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Ed P. Sanders, Albert I. Baumgarten and Alan Mendelson (London: SCM Press, 1982), 137–160 and 213–236 notes that there was no universal cult, but rather "his cults were regional and emphasized different aspects of the god. In ritual terms, a Delphic maenad, an Athenian celebrating the Anthesteria, and a Greek from southern Italy who was an initiate of an Orphico-Dionysiac

Pamela Gordon also notes that the language of the Second Sophistic adds a particular colouring to Epicurean discourse from that period.[3] Nevertheless, the extant documents attributed to Epicurus remain significant, particularly the three letters and Κυρίαι Δόξαι (KD) preserved in Diogenes Laertius 10, the VS, and fragments from Herculaneum. The writings of other Epicureans are also important. These include Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (hereafter DRN), the works of Philodemus recovered from Herculaneum,[4] and the inscription of Diogenes from Oenanda. Epicurean themes are also explored in the philosophical writings of Cicero, Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus, Porphyry, and Simplicius:[5] Seneca, Stobaeus, and Athenaeus also describe Epicurean philosophy. Epicurean shading appears elsewhere, particularly in the pastoral writings of Horace, Vergil, and Statius: the *locus amoenus* (pleasant place) is an idyll for both the poets and the school.[6] Diogenes Laertius is a frustrating source: its list of writings attributed to Epicurus provides a stark reminder about the limits of access to the fullness of the tradition, and, therefore, a warning about how difficult it might be to reconstruct exactly what an Epicurean might value from the full range of the school's writing.

By Pierre Hadot's reckoning, all of the four major philosophical traditions (Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism) were found in every important town by the imperial period.[7] Epicureanism, thus, was not a philosophical school whose influence was limited to mainland Greece or even the Greek-speaking world. After the third century BCE there were Epicurean centres in Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt: adherents, identified from their cities,

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sect had very little in common, and their separate Dionysiac identities were not interchangeable" (151–152).

[3] Pamela Gordon, *Epicurus in Lycia* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 45–54.

[4] For a history of scholarly engagement with the Herculaneum materials, see David Armstrong, "Philodemus, the Herculaneum Papyri and the Therapy of Fear" in *Epicurus; His Continuing Influence and Contemporary Relevance*, ed. Dane R. Gordon and David B. Suits (Rochester, NY: RIT Graphic Arts Press, 2003), 17–43. For details on the archaeology of the Villa of the Papyri and the library of Philodemus, Marcello Gigante, *Philodemus in Italy: The Books from Herculaneum*, trans. Dirk Obbink. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

[5] Inwood and Gerson, *The Epicurus Reader Indianapolis*, IN: Hackett Publishing Co. Inc. 1994 provides a handy compilation of the bulk of these texts.

[6] See further in Chapter 6. For the pastoral genre, Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Methuen, 1971; Evangelos Karakasis, *Song Exchange in Roman Pastoral: Trends in Classics- Supplementary Vol. 5* (New York, NY/Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011); John Rundin, "The Epicurean Morality of Vergil's 'Bucolics'", *The Classical World*, 96/2 (1986), 159–176; Peter L. Smith "Lentus in Umbra: A Symbolic Pattern in Vergil's Eclogues", *Phoenix* 19 (1965), 298–304.

[7] Hadot, *What is Philosophy?,* 147.

came from Tyre, Sidon, Tarsus, and Alexandria.[8] Epicureanism also expanded west. Through the writings of Lucretius, it had made inroads to the Latin-speaking world, where its significance may also be noted in the philosophical writings of Cicero and Seneca. The existence of communities in the Naples region is attested by both Horace and Vergil.[9] Epicureanism was particularly rooted in the expanding cities of the Eastern Mediterranean where its stress on community and its disregard for social distinctions fitted with the diversity of the populace.[10] Although Epicureanism waned in influence, it still had its adherents in the 1st Century CE,[11] with supporters even in the upper classes of the late Republic who could study either in Italy or Greece.[12]

Michael Erler notes that Epicureanism was still in circulation during the Principate, even if scholarly interest often wanes after the time of Lucretius.[13] Seneca, whose sympathies lay rather with Stoicism, noted the popularity of Epicureanism in the mid-first century CE, commenting that Epicurus is respected "not only by the more cultured, but also by the ignorant rabble".[14] This statement, even allowing for a rhetorical or polemic dimension also admits that Epicurean influence was not restricted to those who might be classed as formal adherents of the school: this makes plausible the presence of Epicurean phenomena in popular discourse and practice resembling *bricolage* outside the boundaries of formal Epicureanism.[15] Other writers from different contexts bear witness to its persistence: Plutarch, Lucian, as well as the Church Fathers and Augustine.[16] Epicureanism can be attested in a broad variety of locations: Herculaneum, Sorrento, Rhodes, Cos, Pergamon, Oenoanda (the Lycus valley),

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[8] Jones, *Epicurean Tradition*, 64.

[9] See below, Chapter 7.

[10] Jones, *Epicurean Tradition*, 64.

[11] Jones, *Epicurean Tradition*, 76–84.

[12] Elizabeth Asmis, "Basic Education in Antiquity" in *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Yun Lee Too (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 209–39; Robert S. Dutch, *The Educated Elite in 1 Corinthians: Education and Community Conflict in Graeco-Roman Corinth* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 87; Erlend D. MacGillvray, "The Popularity of Epicureanism in Elite Late Roman Society", *The Ancient World* XLIII/2 (2012), 151–172 in particular for Epicureanism in Rome and Campania.

[13] Michael Erler, "Epicureanism in the Roman Empire" in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. James Warren, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 46–64 at 46.

[14] Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 79.15, quoted in Tomlin, "Christians and Epicureans", 54.

[15] Marilyn J. Legge, "Bricoleurs-in-Community: Reframing Theologies of Culture". *Religious Studies and Theology*, 16 (1997), 5–21 describes bricolage as "the art of using what is at hand, odd materials for purposes other than intended, to create something useful and distinct to meet a yearning or need. This is an accessible practice often found where people aim to survive against the odds." (6).

[16] Erler, "Epicureanism in the Roman Empire" 46–47; R. P. Jungkuntz, *Epicureanism and the Church Fathers*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Winsconsin, 1961.

Apameia (Syria), Rhodiapolis, and Amastris (Bithynia).[17] Locations like Athens and Oxyrhynchus provide evidence for the preservation of Epicurean writing, as well as Herculaneum.[18] A number of these raise the possibility of locations shared with the FG, whose provenance is still contested. Asia Minor (notably Ephesus), Alexandria, and Syria are all suggested as prime candidates for its location.[19]

That said, geographical coincidence cannot prove conclusively a meeting of the two traditions, only a degree of probability. It still might be the case that two schools effectively never met. Let us look at the potential locations where such encounter might have taken place by detailing first the potential locations of the FG, and then contemporary evidence in those same places for Epicureanism.

B. The Provenance of the FG

Provenance may embrace a number of considerations: it may refer to an intellectual or geographical map. For current purposes, geography suffices: the work which follows will explore the intellectual mapping of the FG and Epicureanism.

Several locations have been suggested for the FG. Interest in potential Mandaean sources and influence led to Trans-Jordania being viewed as a potential location.[20] However, the connection of the FG and Mandaeanism is viewed as increasingly problematic: the claims made for a necessary dependency on such material are no longer viewed as strong.[21] The relative datings of the FG (increasingly seen to predate crucial Mandaean texts)[22] raise questions of which tradition might draw from the other, and the location might refer to sources rather than the gospel itself. The Semitic or Aramaic flavour of the FG's language has also been presented as an argument in favour of such an origin, but

17 Erler, "Epicureanism in the Roman Empire", 48.

18 Tiziano Dorandi. "The School and Texts of Epicurus in the Early Centuries of the Roman Empire", in *Plotinus and Epicurus: Matter, Perception, Pleasure*, ed. Angela Longo and Daniela Patrizia Taormina (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 29–48.

19 Brown, *The Gospel*, ciii–civ; W. Carter, *John: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 188; W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 246–247; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel, Vol. 1*, 149–152.

20 Schnackenburg, *The Gospel, Vol. 1*, 150.

21 Wisdom literature may as readily provide the substance of a descent mythology as Mandaeanism, see Lindars, *The Gospel,* 40–42. Barrett, *The Gospel,* 37–38 suggests the differences between mystery religions and redeemer myths of descent far outweigh any similarities. Schnackenburg, *John, Vol. 1*, 142 notes the incompatibility of Mandaean and Christian concepts of revelation.

22 Barrett, *The Gospel*, 41; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel, Vol. 1*, 143.

given the more widespread use of Aramaic across the Near East, Asia Minor, and Egypt, this is not conclusive.[23] Conversely, the need to explain Palestinian locations may not rule out completely a Palestinian audience, but does beg the question.[24]

Syria is also suggested, sometimes on account of Gnostic associations. Here the affinities between the FG and the *Odes of Solomon* give some, but no definite, grounds: Bultmann's claims are overblown.[25] The fact that gnosis is not specific only to Syria, but found elsewhere, is also a consideration.[26] Keener notes that linguistic parallels between the FG and Gnostic texts often turn into circular arguments.[27]

The presence of gnosis in Egypt together with early papyrus evidence for the FG (P^{52} and Papyrus Egerton) have suggested that the FG originated there. However, the simple presence of papyrological evidence merely shows that copies of the FG were in circulation or being copied there: a fragment need not have been composed where it was found. Indeed, climate introduces a distortion: given that most ancient manuscripts of the NT are found in Egypt the logical endpoint of such thinking would be that the bulk of such documents originated there.[28] The claim that an Aramaic Signs Source for the FG comes from Egypt cannot be readily substantiated.[29] The style of writing suggests a date between 117 and 138 CE for the earliest of these fragments, sometime after datings based on non-physical considerations, which indicate production between the late 60s CE[30] to the end of the first century CE.[31] Other considerations for a provenance in Egypt are doctrinal. However, as many of the Gnostic materials are significantly later than the FG itself, the gnosis which would have been contemporary with the FG remains elusive,[32] and the baptismal

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[23] Ruth B. Edwards, *Discovering John: Content, Interpretation, Reception*, 2nd ed. (London, SPCK, 2014), 53–55.

[24] Keener, *The Gospel*, 143–144.

[25] Bultmann, *The Gospel*, 11–12; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel, Vol. 1*, 150.

[26] Schnackenburg, *The Gospel,* 151.

[27] Keener, *The Gospel,* 146.

[28] Cf. Lindars, *The Gospel*, 43.

[29] Keener, *Gospel,* 143.

[30] Thus, Mark A. Matson, "Current Approaches to the Priority of John", *Stone-Campbell Journal* 7 (2004), 73–100 and John A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London; SCM Press, 1976). Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Leicester: Apollos, 2001), 42 notes that arguments from silence underpin much of this claim.

[31] Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in Light of John 6* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International,1996), 29–30; Kyle Keefer, *The Branches of the Gospel of John: The Reception of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Library of New Testament Studies Vol. 332. London: T&T Clark, 2006), 21–26.

[32] Schnackenburg, *The Gospel, Vol. 1*, 151.